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Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA

By Antonio J. Mendez. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1999, 351 pages.

Reviewed by

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Former CIA officer Tony Mendez states the theme of his book immediately in the preface: "I want this book to describe as accurately as memory permits a few of the operations my colleagues and I conducted. The reader can judge for himself the quality of our service in the cause of freedom."

That quality of service was indeed, as portrayed, excellent--as is the detail in the book itself. No doubt many in the Clandestine Service (CS) will view the book as containing too many details and will wonder how--and why--the Publications Review Board (PRB) passed it as published. That Mendez, a deserving recipient of the CIA's Trailblazer Award, is unabashedly pro-CIA is quite clear throughout the book, sometimes to a fault. It is also the kind of book the CIA needs to tell some of its great success stories. Times have indeed changed when an author thanks the PRB in his acknowledgments!

The book is both an easy and enjoyable read. It contains more detail on life inside the CIA than any book this reviewer has read yet on intelligence. From his discussions about riding "the Bluebird" (the Agency bus) around Washington, to the colorful--and true--descriptions of the "carrier landings" game at the bar at "Camp Swampy" (an Agency training facility), it is authentic writing at its best.

As a former "Asian hand," I can verify from personal knowledge many of the events and details of operations in East Asia as described by Mendez. Although he takes care to disguise many of the personalities involved, they will be quite transparent to "insiders." For example, those who served in Asia will recognize "Bull Monahan" immediately from Mendez's accurate portrayal. Many a young case officer, myself included, were treated to regular lectures on the technical aspects of espionage in Bull's own office, where his array of gadgets included a complete keymaking machine. The three pages devoted to Monahan are excellent tributes to a man who paid intense attention to the technical aspects of our craft and who passed those on to the next generation of officers.

I was pleased that Mendez included his recollections of George Kisevalter's lectures. Those of us who were privileged to be on the receiving end of these lectures will never forget them. Similarly, his description of dealing with some of our most important agents, such as (a high-level Asian official) and official), give a real feel for the difficult business of dealing with human sources. This will help the reader to understand the complexities of these vulnerable human beings.

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I do have minor criticisms of certain aspects of the book, but they certainly do not detract from its substance and value. For example, I was disappointed to find Mendez identifying one former high-level officer by true name and criticizing him as "...being in denial." Having taken pains to use pseudos throughout most of the book, he could have done the same here. I saw no purpose in singling this officer out for criticism.

Those who have had to deal with disguise will identify readily with Mendez's description of the difficulty of going through sensory deprivation, where the subject's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth are covered; it takes a special person to keep the trust of the subject throughout this ordeal.

Those of my students who have read the book were particularly appreciative of how the author placed his operations into historical context. The inclusion of ample and important historical details and background lends cohesion to the book and contributes to its value to nonintelligence professionals.

I recently watched Mendez discussing his book on Good Morning America, and his presentation was terrific. The audience was particularly impressed with Mendez's account of why the Agency used a film company for cover to smuggle some American officials out of Iran during the hostage crisis and why it worked. Mendez explained it simply: "Everyone wants to be in the movies." It is this type of understanding and audacity that make Mendez--and his book--so successful.

The book may encourage other former Agency employees to seek permission to recount their own adventures in espionage. If so, the history of espionage would be enriched.

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